

Fort Worth Business Press

The people care about water – so why don't their leaders?

Richard Connor - April 09, 2007



*Full house: The Barnett Shale Symposium.
Photo by Jon P. Uzzel*

Whisper the two words “Barnett Shale” and before you know it, a crowd will gather to listen as if you are about to deliver the Sermon on the Mount.

The largest natural gas play in the country, right here in Tarrant County, has made a number of local residents millionaires and created much more than a cottage industry. It's the equivalent of a large, gated housing community or even a small city.

Numerous opportunities abound with the Barnett Shale exploration and success, as do numerous challenges. Municipalities such as the city of Fort Worth, for instance, are watching their coffers bulge from gas-well royalties and leases on city-owned property. Many observers correctly worry that the city will increase spending at a rate commensurate with its newfound source of revenue, only to leave taxpayers holding the bag – an empty bag – when the flow of gas and money either drops off substantially or dries up completely.

Most wells do not produce forever. Revenue almost certainly will decline – and the decline could be both drastic and rapid.

Other questions revolve around environmental impact, both in the wide-open spaces and ranchland areas of Tarrant County and in neighborhoods where associations of homeowners, once focused on planning their Fourth of July

parades, now spend time listening to lectures on gas leases and drilling regulations.

Last fall, the Fort Worth Business Press launched a series of seminars to discuss various aspects of the Barnett Shale. We offer explanations and what amount to mini-lectures by experts, many of whom are lawyers who make presentations as panelists.

For our most recent Barnett Shale Symposium, a standing-room-only crowd gathered at the Fort Worth Hilton to hear several speakers discuss Barnett Shale-related issues, including the growing impact of gas-well drilling on the area's water supply. Bill Meadows, a former Fort Worth city councilman and a member of the Texas Water Development Board, served as moderator; the featured speaker was Robert Mace, the Water Development Board's division director of groundwater resources.

Mace is among the state's most noted authorities on water – particularly the Trinity Aquifer, which is the primary source of groundwater for our region.

Mace warned that over time the aquifer will face serious depletion issues. It will become more and more difficult to supply all the water we need as Tarrant County continues to grow, both industrially and residentially. Exploration in the Barnett Shale also puts pressure on the availability of water.

While the general public apparently found such issues compelling enough to spend several hours pondering them and asking questions about them in a packed hotel ballroom, members of the board that governs the Tarrant Regional Water District were conspicuous by their absence.

You might think that a group of public officials whose primary mission is to manage the area's water resources and ensure an ample supply of clean, safe water for homes and businesses would want front-row seats for a program dealing in such depth with their area of responsibility. But of course the water board's attention in recent years has been focused less and less on its real job – water management and preservation – and more and more on its latest plaything, the \$435 million extravagance known as the Trinity River Vision.

Perhaps if we had devoted part of our symposium to a discussion of town lakes, riverwalks and the economic development benefits of eminent domain, water board members would have found time to attend. Maybe next time.

While the water board fiddles with the river, North Texas is desperately in need of inspired and dedicated leadership to preserve our precious water reserves for ourselves and for future generations.

Elected officials, including water board members, city council representatives, county commissioners and state legislators, need to step forward and confront the looming water crisis. If the people's leaders don't care enough to learn all they can about this crucial issue, then the people need to find some new leaders. And, based on the burgeoning level of public interest in this subject, the

people may be gearing up to do just that.

Meanwhile, we're struck with a regional water board that is clearly more interested in economic development than in water preservation, so the public needs to put some pressure on board members. One way to do it would be to attend the board's meetings, which are held at 9:30 a.m. on the third Tuesday of every month. The meetings are conducted at the water district's administrative offices, 800 E. Northside Drive in Fort Worth.

Maybe some of the board's constituents who attended our symposium could pass along some of what they learned about water to the water board. The water board could certainly use the information.

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